

Luke 13: 1-9
(Isaiah 55: 1-13)

Wesley Uniting Church 9/10:30
Lent 3, Year C 3/3/13

The Grace of Blood and Bone

Gardening is not one of my claims to fame; I love plants and flowers but, sadly, I've always tended to kill them. So you can imagine my fear and dismay when, just over three years ago, I inherited a beautiful garden and was poignantly charged with its care. Fay had planned and planted it all; she had lovingly tended it with a lot of dedicated work. She was still walking around inspecting it every morning until her final two weeks. In her memory I wanted to do well when it was my responsibility but, given my previous history, I feared the worst. I kept remembering a best-selling book published in the early 1970's, when I was working in a book store. *The Purple-Thumbed Gardener* was the title, 'purple' being in contrast, of course, to those very blessed and fortunate people whom we speak of as having 'green thumbs.' Well, I'm definitely of the 'purple thumb' tradition.

However I think both 'green' and 'purple' thumbs, both gardeners and non-gardeners alike, might just feel a bit sad and frightened by today's gospel reading about the time limits set for bearing fruit and the threat of being cut down. Knowing that this description of a less-than-healthy fig tree was used by Jesus as a metaphor of humanity is far from comforting or confidence-building. To tell you the truth, whenever I come to this Sunday in the lectionary cycle, I just think "Thank God for Isaiah!" Because, contrary to what we usually think of Hebrew scripture, in today's reading from Isaiah there is not even a hint of the God of anger and judgement, but rather only God who is the great provider and constant source of mercy. The apparent contrast could hardly be sharper, and it defies our stereotypical views of 'old' and 'new' testaments.

With these seemingly quite opposing views of God represented in just this one day's lectionary readings, is it any wonder that people are easily confused about the nature of God? Is there one God portrayed in Hebrew scripture and another God in ancient Greek Christian writings? If so, then didn't today's lectionary really mess up that distinction? Is God all-judgement or all-love? And, if so, then why is the Bible inconsistent with such formulations? Or is God much more complex than these quick and easy definitions? What does scripture really say, when we do more than merely quote phrases out of context?

Isaiah chapter 55 is the last part of what biblical scholars commonly call "Second Isaiah." Chapters 40 to 55 are a collection of prophecies dated to the time of the Exile, and thus could hardly have been written by the same person who is identified as 'Son of Amoz and who famously documents his own call to

prophetic ministry as being “in the year that King Uzziah died.” Even though that exact year is actually quite difficult to determine, it was certainly no later than 733 B.C.E. and thus well before the Exile. Anyone alive in 733 B.C.E. could not have still been an active prophet nearly two centuries later during the reign of the last Babylonian ruler, Nabonidus, which is the most likely time for the writing of these middle chapters of Isaiah. The early chapters are clearly written before the Exile; these middle chapters during the last phase of the Exile, and the final chapters probably after the return of some of the exiled people to Judea. They are collected into one great thematic book to document prophecy through this entire critical phase of Jewish development, titled for one of the greatest of all Hebrew prophets.

From those wonderful words that open Chapter 40...”Comfort, O comfort my people...” to the last benediction here in Chapter 55...”You shall go out with joy and be led forth in peace...” the message of Second Isaiah is one of hope and encouragement for people who have been pushed to the limits of their social, religious and political endurance. The reality of God here is found in the midst of deprivation, where God is as wonderful as a drink of water to the parched throat, or a feast of rich food for the starving. But we should remember when we read and hear these words that these people believed that God had already judged them, had found them lacking in faithful obedience; and thus the calamity of exile had come upon them. So, in this context, God’s grace and mercy is a redemptive balance to God’s judgement. It could likewise be said that, in this context of the Gospel reading, God’s judgement is a humbling and instructive balance to generous blessings.

Both readings—the Luke passage and Isaiah 55—raise two of the most difficult theological questions we can ask: first, the question of whether or not God *causes* calamity; and the second is what it really means when we survive calamity (or, perhaps even more importantly, what it really means when we do not survive). And here is when we can begin to also give thanks to God for Luke and the teachings of Jesus.

I think this is particularly important for those of us who follow the Protestant tradition in which all of scripture tends to be regarded as of equal value; all of it designated “Word of God” nearly to the extreme meaning of “the actual words of God.” Catholic and Orthodox tradition does not do this; in these the Gospels are always prominent, and to this day this is evident even in worship services in which the congregation stands for the reading of the Gospel but sits for other readings. That is not to say that the rest of scripture is *unimportant* but rather to indicate that the Gospels take precedence because it is in them—and only in them—that we can get close to the actual voice of Jesus.

Today his is a voice we desperately need to hear. For in this strange little section of Luke's gospel, Jesus answers those questions about the nature of calamity, our response to it, and God's role in it. Firstly, he says (against all the traditional thought of his time) that suffering is definitely *not* the result of sin. Some Galileans had suffered terribly under the power of Pilate, but Jesus says: "Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? No!" Then Jesus does not claim that God *causes* calamity as any sort of judgement. The tower of Siloam fell, killing eighteen people, but Jesus sees no reason to assign blame to God for this. And finally, he says that both we and God have an obligation to respond to these difficult challenging things in a way that brings meaning, and hope, and salvation.

In the ancient world—as in ours—both the evil deeds of humanity (such as those of Babylonian captors or Roman dictators) *and* natural disaster (such as the earthquake that was probably the reason for the tower collapse at Siloam) *just happen*. They happen regularly and far too often for our comfort; they happen to good and bad people alike. Not only because of sin, certainly not because God wants it that way, not in order to 'test' or 'punish' anyone—but just because that's how this still-imperfect world is—these things *happen*. It is not an explanation for them, but rather our *response* to them, that really matters.

Jesus says that humanity's response, when such things happen, ought to be to *turn to God*—that is the full meaning of "repent", a much deeper significance than simply being sorry for sin. We must *turn to God*, or else we will not survive such horrors; we will perish without hope for the future and without meaning for the present. Fortunately we often see that disasters do bring out the best in humans, that people do turn to God, and that we care for each other as God desires. This is of critical importance.

But, much more surprisingly, Jesus goes on to say that God has a responsibility too in response to suffering. God, the good gardener, must do more than just 'plant' the world and expect it to turn out a certain way. Despite the temptation to just 'cut it down' and start over when things go wrong, God must be willing to give it another chance—as long as there is anyone who, like Jesus, is willing to work and pray and sacrifice to make the world a better place. The story of the fig tree ends abruptly, before we know the final result, only on the promise that there may be hope. And that is precisely why we can all believe that there *is* always hope in every circumstance of our lives.

I'm still on a steep learning curve where gardening is concerned, but things are going pretty well in what is now 'my' garden and one thing I know for sure: fertilizer helps. Digging around, disturbing the soil, and then adding what the Bible says Jesus himself called 'manure'—that helps. It may not look nice or

smell good, but it helps the growing. All the gardeners I know say there's nothing better than a bit of 'blood and bone,' which I think may just remind us again of God's surprising response to human need.

It does seem sometimes that life can have more than its fair share of manure. But isn't it good that, in the face of all the difficulties of human existence, we get what we need to survive?

God could have sent us all the host of heaven to lift us out of the mud of struggle into the sunlight of joy.

But, instead, God sent us the grace of enfleshed revelation—in one willing to have our challenges, share our struggles, experience our calamities, even to die our death—in order that we might live and grow, turning toward God just as surely as a flower opens to the light of dawn.

It is his words by which we learn the whole truth of God,
his life through which we have whole and abundant life,
his sacrifice in which we experience complete renewal,
his victory that claims our hope,
his name which we bear into a world that needs—now as much as ever—
this grace of blood and bone.

Rev. J.R. Huggett